

# As the Crow Flies

By J. D. Beresford

It is more than twenty years, now, since the late George Wallace came into the offices of Hallows and Rice one afternoon and talked to me about the novel he was writing. He was well known, even then, as journalist, essayist, playwright, and poet, and I welcomed with enthusiasm the suggestion that the firm of publishers for which I was then reader should consider the book when it was written. He told me in the strictest confidence that the title was to be *As the Crow Flies*, and gave me a hint of the subject he proposed to treat. Both title and subject were, I thought, admirable from every point of view, but he said that he would prefer me to say nothing to the firm about the novel until it was actually written. "Wait until you've read it, my dear chap," he said. "I haven't told another soul as yet, and I don't want to, until the thing's done and off my hands."

I did not see him again for nearly six months. He was the guest of the evening at a small literary dining club on that occasion, and when I went over and sat down by him, after the speeches, he instantly referred to our last interview by saying, "It's getting on, but we can't talk about it here. How's the business?" I told him that the business, so far as I was concerned, remained in a state of tense expectation for a really firstclass novel. He nodded with an air of satisfaction. "You shall have it," he said. "If you'll walk part of the way home with me I'll tell you something about it." He lived at Highgate, and my rooms were at Herne Hill, but I was prepared to miss the last train rather than lose that confidence. I was very eager in those days.

And I certainly did not regret the walk to Highgate and back, nor the two hours' wait at Ludgate Hill for the 3.15 'paper' train. Wallace let himself go that night, and made me realise that his novel was to be the best thing for years. He told me all about it. The book was to be a complete exposition of the British national character, as portrayed in the person of his hero, Joseph Blake. Blake was to be a success; a typical member of the middle class, educated at a grammar school, entering a business career at eighteen, and Parliament at forty-five; achieving cabinet rank at fifty-four, and the Premiership at sixty-three. As a background to the central figure there were to be any number of minor characters, all, as it were, supporting and representing Blake—"the firm mass of British opinion" Wallace called it. The single exception was to be a school friend of Blake's, a man of brilliant parts, but without social or personal ambitions, who spent his life in writing works of philosophy that nobody wanted to read. He was not poor, nor, a sense, neglected—"we'll get away altogether from the typical romance," Wallace commented—but his work and life counted for nothing in popular opinion. The real climax of the book, and incidentally the very first suggestion that Blake was not a great man nor his friend ("I have thought of calling him John Rooke," Wallace said) a failure, was reached in the last few pages, when Blake, after a prolonged illness, and patiently waiting for death, confides in Rooke that he knows, now, that such a career as his had been was wasted effort. To which Rooke replies that he had known that at school.

"How much of the book have you written?" I asked Wallace just before we parted.

"About 80,000 words," he told me, "but I am not absolutely satisfied with some of the detail. What I propose to do is to finish the thing and then partly rewrite it."

He went to America on a long lecture-tour that autumn,

I did not see him again for twelve months. I sought him but, then, because McGillett made a casual reference to the magnum opus at lunch one day, and I realised that I was no longer the only recipient of Wallace's confidence. In those days one of McGillett's sources of income was finding books for publishers, and afterwards using what influence he had to get his discoveries well noticed in the Press; and when I found that he knew about the book, I was afraid that I might not, after all, get it for Hallows and Rice.

Wallace reassured me, however. He said that he never went back on a bargain, amid when I pointed out to him that no bargain had been made as yet, he promised to call at the office next day and discuss terms with the partners. On my recommendation, the terms offered were amazingly liberal for a first novel; but my enthusiasm was powerful enough for once to overcome the awful inertia of old Hallows. (He had been in the publishing business for thirty years, and his one idea was to buy as cheaply as he could. He had no conception of what Rice and myself understood by 'enterprise.') The firm even went so far as to offer to pay a proportion of the 'advance' on signing the agreement, but Wallace refused to accept that. He said that it would harass him to feel tied; amid he would not promise any particular date for the delivery of the manuscript. "I've nearly finished the book," he told us, "but when it's written, I want to put it away for three months and then go right through it again with a fresh mind. I mean this book to be a classic." Old Hallows was tremendously impressed, I remember, and congratulated me on having made "a real find."

After that agreement was signed I no longer felt it necessary to hold my tongue about the book, and I dropped a hint or two here and there as to what might be expected when it was published. I cannot believe, however, that I was time chief instigator of the steadily growing interest that was being aroused by the promise of Wallace's novel. No doubt both old Hallows and Rice made occasional references in public to the same subject, but I fancy that Wallace himself was the really active propagandist. In any case, one was continually finding references to is the *As the Crow Flies* in the Press that spring, even the name of Joseph Blake was sometimes referred to as an exemplar of the British character. The book was asked for at the libraries, and I more than once met people who declared that they had read it. At the office we had decided to print a first edition of 20,000 copies, and we put a note about it in our autumn list. Wallace assured me that summer (1899) that the thing was done and only needed a final revision. "If I died tomorrow," he said, "the story is all there ready to be published, but there is an incident or two that I want to alter before I send along to you. I mean to deliver you a perfect manuscript. I sha'n't touch the thing in proof."

And then, of course, we did not press him for delivery in autumn of that year. We should not, in any case, have published so important a book during the first months of the Boer war. And in the following spring Wallace himself went out to South Africa. I did not see him before he went. In fact, I did not know he had enlisted until I saw a reference to the fact in the "literary notes" that were just beginning to break out again in the daily and weekly papers.

In that paragraph Wallace's name was, as usual, coupled with that of his novel is *As the Crow Flies*, a precedent that was invariably followed two months later in his obituary notices. (It will be remembered that he died of enteric in June 1900.) Many of the writers assumed that the book had already been published, but some of the better informed expressed their eagerness to read the book which they understood had been completed before Wallace went out to the front.

I firmly believe that our failure to discover that precious manuscript of Wallace's was the cause of old Hallows's break-down and subsequent retirement from the business. He used to go up to Highgate two or three days a week to search Wallace's house for possible hiding places.

“He would have been sure to have put it in some very safe place before he left the country,” he would say, and then fret himself into a fever lamenting the “rank imbecility” of not having insisted on taking charge of the precious script before Wallace went away.

Rice’s theory was that Wallace had taken the MS. with him to make his final revision, but I have often wondered whether Wallace had ever begun it. I have found a suggestion of that one fatal omission, in his title. He took too direct a method. So far as he was concerned, the book was written, and published, and noticed, without his having put pen to paper.

But the queer thing is that the unwritten book has outlived him. For some reason it was not forgotten in the stress of the South African war. And it will be remembered that, in the reaction of the first years of this century, *As the Crow Flies* was constantly ‘quoted,’ and that there was quite a controversy as to whether the figure of Joseph Blake did not stand for that of Joseph Chamberlain.

Indeed, I was tempted to put down these notes of the true facts of the case because a friend asked me yesterday where he could get a book called *As the Crow Flies*, by George Wallace. A man had told him, he said, that it was the finest novel of the century.